WSCB Multi-agency Protocol for Young Runaways and Missing Children and Young People

Purpose of protocol:
This interim protocol is designed to ensure effective multi-agency practice in Wandsworth to respond to the needs of children and young people who go missing and may be at risk as a result of being absent from home or their normal residence.

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Approved by: Wandsworth Safeguarding Children Board
Date: 04/02/10
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1. Introduction

This protocol addresses local working arrangements agreed by the Wandsworth Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB). The WSCB work according to the ‘Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care’. The WSCB has also adopted the supplementary London Child Protection Procedures for Safeguarding Children Missing from Care and Home. It is acknowledged that the Police are the Lead Agency for missing children, working in partnership with all agencies.

2. Background

The Children’s Society’s Still Running II (2005) survey estimates that around 100,000 young people under the age of 16 run away from home or care each year across the UK. Many of these young people stay with friends or family members, but there are some who do not have access to these networks of support and end up in harmful situations such as sleeping rough.

Some of the findings of Still Running II were:
- 52 per cent of young runaways returned to their home or care placement after one night away;
- 1 in 6 young runaways sleeps rough; and
- 1 in 12 young runaways is hurt or harmed while away.

Running away is usually a sign that a crisis point has been reached. It is vital therefore, that local authorities do everything they can to engage children and young people and inform them about the risks of running away and the services available to support them and their families to resolve issues before they decide to run.

The WSCB recognises that there are also links with children and young people who go missing from home and care and the risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking. This document has been approved as the interim protocol to address issues of concern in relation to children who go missing from home and care. It will be incorporated with an overall protocol that addresses this issue, as well as children and young people risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

3. Scope of this protocol

This protocol embraces a number of areas in which children and young people may be at risk as a result of being absent from their family home or normal residence.
3.1 Children and young people missing from their family home

The principles agreed by the agencies supporting this protocol apply to all children and young people who have run away from their family home and include:

- The importance of available advice and support to young people who may be experiencing personal difficulties at home or school.
- Efficient and accurate recording by the Police of reports of children and young people who have run away from home.
- Support to parents and carers during the period the child/young person is missing.
- Efficient and sensitive independent interview offered/made available to the child or young person once they return home.
- Inter-agency working to ensure effective and cohesive support is offered where necessary (see local guidance for staff - App C)

This local protocol will be used alongside the London Child Protection Procedure for Safeguarding Children Missing from Home and Care.

3.2 Children and young people missing from care

These children and young people fall within the scope of the London Child Protection Procedures for children who go missing from care. It includes detailed guidelines for the timescales for reporting, the determination of the level of risk, decision-making stages, etc. It covers children and young people who are missing from care for any reason.

All agencies should follow the London Child Protection Procedures if a child goes missing from care.

3.3 Children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking

WSCB adopted and follow the supplementary London Child Protection Procedures for Safeguarding Children abused through Sexual Exploitation (this needs to be read in conjunction with the supplementary procedure for Safeguarding Sexually Active Children) and Safeguarding Trafficked and Exploited Children. We recognise that there are close links between the work to support children who go missing and the work to support and protect those at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking, and that those young people who go missing are particularly vulnerable to these forms of harm.

3.4 Young people who may be vulnerable, single and homeless
The Joint protocol between Housing and Children’s Specialist Services addressing the needs of young people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness, sets out the eligibility criteria and working protocols between the two services. Where the young person is not a relevant child or a ‘child in need’, reconciliation within the family is the housing officers’ first response. A referral to Diversions Project could also be considered.

3.5 Children and young people missing from education

The response to children in these circumstances is covered in the statutory guidance in respect of Children Not Receiving a Suitable Education, the ‘London Good Practice Guidance for Safeguarding Children Missing from School’, and Wandsworth’s procedures and interagency protocol for Children Not Receiving a Suitable Education.

4 Regular Networking & Communication

The WSCB has formed the ‘Children and Young People Missing from Home and Care Working Group’, who will meet on a regular basis to:
- ensure clear communication arrangements are in place between the Police and all partner agencies as part of a response to when a child or young person goes missing;
- exchange information on practice issues;
- receive and analyse local data;
- oversee the development of a continuously improved service response to young runaways; and
- advise the WSCB’s Monitoring sub-group on current trends and developments.

If an agency becomes aware that a child is missing, they will check with the police – even if the parents have confirmed they have reported the child missing. They can contact the non-emergency number on 0300 123 1212 to find out if the child has been reported missing. If the child or young person has not already been reported missing, they can then report this.

The Police will circulate details to the relevant agencies if a child or young person has been missing for more than 48 hours (or earlier for more vulnerable children)

5 Prevention

It is the responsibility of all agencies to ensure they have risk assessments processes in place that assist staff in considering the likelihood of:
- a child or young person they are working with going missing and
• being at significant risk if actually becoming missing.

5.1 Push/Pull factors

Children and young people run away for a variety of reasons, but whatever the reason, running away is often a sign that something is wrong in the child’s or young person’s life and a response must be made quickly.

In order to conduct a thorough assessment, it is important to ask the child or young person the reason why they have run away, as this will inform decisions about the appropriate service intervention or response.

Research carried out by the Social Exclusion Unit Young Runaways (2002), found that the top reasons for running away are:

**Push factors**
- Problems at home – ranging from arguments with parents to long-term abuse or maltreatment.
- Family break-up – young people drawn into their parents’ conflicts are less likely to do well at school and more likely to truant or to run away from home.
- Mental health problems – a disproportionate number of young people who run away from home have mental health problem.
- Bullying – children who are being severely bullied are more likely to run away from school and home or care.
- Teenage pregnancy – some young women run away or are forced to leave home because they become pregnant (or fear that they may be pregnant).

- They may also be in denial about their pregnancy, meaning that they are not getting the advice they need about pregnancy options. There is also a greater risk of pregnancy when girls run away, and those working with them will need to ensure they have rapid access to confidential contraception and sexual health services to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

**Pull factors**
- Running to be near friends or family – especially when a young person is in care and there are problems in contact arrangements with family and friends.
- Grooming for potential sexual exploitation or child trafficking – young people may run away or go missing following grooming by adults who will seek to exploit them. (Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care, p.10).
6 Responding to children and young people who go missing

6.1 Individual Needs and Risk Assessment

Where an individual needs assessment (usually carried out using the Common Assessment Framework) indicates the child may be at risk of harm, a referral should be made to children’s social care. An evaluation of whether the child is likely to run away from home in the future will be one of the factors that informs the level of risk posed to the child, and the decision as to whether a referral to children’s social care is appropriate. The assessment of whether a young person might run away again should be based on information about their:

- individual circumstances, including family circumstances in which the child has gone missing;
- motivation for running;
- possible destination; and
- recent pattern of absences (if any).

When young people missing from home are located but have not been reported missing to the police by their families, further investigation might be warranted. It may be necessary to inquire into whether there are any continuing safeguarding concerns, or whether the young person and their family should be offered family support services.

Consideration should be given to carrying out a new assessment every time a young person runs away. Repeat runaways should be viewed with as much concern as children who run away for the first time. The persistence of this behaviour would suggest at least that the action following from earlier assessments should be reviewed and alternative options considered (Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care, p.23).

6.2 Police Safe and Well Check and Return Interview

Interviewing a child or young person on their return from a missing episode is necessary to understand why the person went missing or ran away in the first place. There are two stages to the process, the Safe and Well Check and the Return Interview. These are known by a variety of names, but for the purpose of this guidance and to achieve some standardisation, will be referred to as such.

Police Safe and Well Check

This is carried out by the police as soon as possible after the person has returned. Its purpose is to check for any indications that the young person has suffered harm; where and with whom they have been; and
to give them an opportunity to disclose any offending by, or against, them.

Where a person goes missing frequently, it may not be practicable to see them every time they return. In these cases, a reasonable decision should be taken with regard to the frequency of such checks. This will mainly apply to young people missing from care who are likely to have other people responsible for their welfare to check this. Every effort should be made to visit those young people missing from home on every occasion.

**Return Interview**

This is a more in-depth interview and is usually best carried out by an independent person who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge. Many young people who run away or go missing need to build up trust with somebody before they will discuss in depth the reasons why they decided to run away. The role will be shared between professionals from different agencies and the process for ensuring this happens is detailed in guidance for duty staff (App C). The interview and actions that follow from it should:

- identify and deal with any harm the child has suffered – including harm that might not have already been disclosed as part of the Safe and Well Check (his/her medical condition should be discussed and any need for medical attention assessed).
- understand and try to address the reasons why the child or young person ran away.
- try to prevent it happening again.

It is good practice that this interview takes place within 72 hours of the young person being located or returning from absence. It is especially important that a Return Interview takes place when a child:

- has been missing for over 24 hours;
- has been missing on two or more occasions;
- has engaged (or is believed to have engaged) in criminal activities during their absence;
- has been hurt or harmed whilst they have been missing (or this is believed to have been the case);
- has known mental health issues;
- is at known risk of sexual exploitation; and/or
- has contact with persons posing risk to children. (Statutory guidance on children who run away and go missing from home or care, p.25)

### 7 Important Services and Helplines

In an emergency call the Police on telephone number **999**.
Metropolitan Police – non-emergency number: 0300 123 1212

**Children’s Specialist Services**  
Duty Team, Referral and Assessment Service  
Tel.: 020 8871 6622  
Fax: 020 8871 6333  
Email: childreferraldutymanager@wandsworth.gov.uk  
Address: Welbeck House  
43-51 Wandsworth High Street  
London  
SW18 2PU  
Outside of normal office hours (after 5pm weekdays or on weekends):  
020 8871 6000

**Missing from Care Helpline** provides publicity to help trace missing children and young people, a network of street workers and advice and support from case managers.  
Freefone: 0500 700 700 (from the UK)  
Tel: +44 (0)20 8392 4527 (outside the UK)  
Email: mfc@missingpersons.org  
Website: www.missingpersons.org

**other useful contacts**

**Education Welfare Service (EWS)**  
Stella Macaulay  
Principal Education Welfare Officer  
Town Hall, Wandsworth High Street  
London SW18 2PU  
020 8871 7961 / 8306

**Youth Support Teams**  
Michele Harris  
Service Manager  
Town hall, Wandsworth High Street  
London SW18 2PU  
0208 871 7272

**Housing**  
Homeless Persons Unit  
17-27 Garratt Lane  
London SW18 4AE  
0208 871 7830

8 Monitoring and review of protocol
The WSCB’s Children & Young People Missing from Home and Care Working Group will meet at least quarterly and will review both the existing protocols and this protocol. The working group will report to the Monitoring sub-group of the WSCB and the WSCB.

9 Glossary

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Appendix A - Young people missing from home process flowchart

### Identify child/young person is missing
Parents/carer/responsible adult identify time by which the child should be at the address.
Parents/carer/responsible adult should make enquiries to locate the missing young person with relatives/friends.
This should include searches of the residence and local area if the child or young person is not located.

### Report to police
Parents/carer/responsible adult should telephone police with details of the missing person.
Details required: child’s name/DOB/where, when and who missing with/what child was last wearing/description of young person/recent photo/medical history/time and location last seen/circumstances of going missing/details of friends and associates.

### Officers conduct a risk-assessment forming the basis for resulting proportionate actions
Enquiries are then on-going.
Sharing of information between the police, parents and other agencies as appropriate.

### Young person is located or returns to home address
When a missing child is located by family or friends etc, it is their responsibility to return the child to the home address.
Where a risk is present, a police officer may accompany the family or the police may be requested to collect and return the child/young person to the place of residence only if it is safe to do so. Parents must inform the police when a child returns of their own accord.

### The police should conduct an interview known as a Safe and Well Check to establish the young person’s well-being and safety, and to establish whether they were the victim of crime or abuse whilst missing.
If warranted, the police should refer child or young person to Children’s Services via normal safeguarding channels.

### Children’s Services or runaway/missing person service to carry out a Return Interview and Assessment of Need
Information established from interview to support assessment of need, to be carried out using the CAF (check whether CAF already exists.) Lead Professional to be appointed.

### Young person offered relevant support by either statutory or voluntary services depending on what is available in the local area, CAF to be updated regularly. In some cases, specialist assessment may be required should it appear that the child or young person has complex needs.
Appendix B - Young people missing from care process flowchart

**Missing**
Residential staff/foster carers should make enquiries to locate the missing person with relatives/friends. This should include searches of the accommodation and local area.

Foster carer then telephone police with details of the missing person. Residential staff e-mail the reporting forms to the police control room and follow up with a phone call as per local agreement

**Details required:**
- Child’s name
- DOB
- Where, when, who missing with?
- What child was last wearing
- Description of young person
- Recent photo
- Medical history
- Legal status

All efforts to locate the child/young person must be recorded and auditable.

**Police**

**Information Sharing**

**LA risk assessment**

**Officers to perform a risk-assessment which will form the basis for the resulting proportionate actions**

**Registered manager of children’s home or fostering services to be informed as soon as possible**

**Sharing of information between the police, parents and other agencies as appropriate.**

**Foster carer/residential staff to notify social worker/team manager.**

**Parents to be informed as agreed**

**Young person is located or returns to the residence**

When a missing child is located, it is the responsibility of residential staff or foster carers to collect the child in the first instance, unless the circumstances pose a risk to them. Where a risk is present, a police officer may be requested to accompany them, or the police may be requested to collect and return the child/young person to the place of residence.

The police will conduct a Safe and Well Check to establish the missing person’s well-being, and to establish whether they were the victim of crime or abuse whilst missing.
Appendix B - Young people missing from care process flowchart (cont.)

Foster carer/residential staff to:
- provide positive non-judgemental return;
- check young person’s medical condition and make necessary arrangements.

Placement staff to inform the social worker and team manager of the young person’s return.

Arrangements for Return Interview to be agreed in consultation with the child. Care plan to be updated.

Consider whether to:
- convene a multi-agency strategy meeting;
- arrange an early looked-after child review;
- review any prevention/support work currently being undertaken with the child.
Appendix C – Children & young people missing from home - Guidance

The following is guidance for duty staff on how to respond to young people who are ‘young runaways’.

In any case of a child who goes missing, the police are the lead agency to investigate the circumstances and seek to find the child/young person. The fact that a child or young person is missing should always be reported to the police.

Children under the age of 11 years who go missing from home cause particular concern, especially if they go missing repeatedly. The expectation is that their circumstances would be subject to investigation under Section 17 or more probably Section 47.

Children and young people over 11 years will need to be followed up as per these guidelines.

The Government have introduced new guidelines in dealing with children and young people who run away from home or care but this procedure is specifically to deal with those that run away from home. There is an established protocol for how to respond when young people who are looked after run away from their care placements.

A child or young person who runs away from home and returns voluntarily or is located and returned by the police must be provided with an ‘independent interview’ outside the family home. This does not need to be undertaken by a social worker but can be a teacher or a professional from another agency that knows the young person, and taking the young person’s wishes into account where possible.

The independent interview should be arranged as soon as possible to establish the reasons why the young person ran away and if there are any issues within the home situation that caused them to leave. It is important to have a clear procedure to ensure that all young people are offered this opportunity.

In practice, when a child/young person reported missing the police are the lead agency. The police undertake a welfare visit if the child/young person returns home or is located and returned home. The police then send a Merlin Report to the Referral & Assessment Service and Education Welfare Service.

On Receipt of the Merlin, the Duty Manager checks the history of running away from home and the details of the police report on the home situation and decides what further action is required.
The options would be as follows:

1. Children with an allocated social worker – information passed to allocated worker to follow up with young person and their family.

2. When CP / safeguarding concerns are being expressed by the child/young person to the police as the reason they are running away from home, then Section 47 CP process would be enacted. The independent interview with the child is then conducted as part of the Section 47 enquiry.

3. When the history on Framework or the police reports indicate that there are concerns within the family for example domestic violence, parental mental health or this is the third time the child/young person has run away from home, then an Initial Assessment would be undertaken. The independent interview would be part of the initial assessment.

4. If there are no safeguarding or child in need concerns that necessitate a referral for assessment by CSS, then a contact should be opened on Framework and the independent interview will be undertaken by another agency (e.g., the Education Welfare Service, if the child/young person is not attending school, the school or another agency known to the young person). To ensure that young people have access to an independent interview, the Initial Contact Worker contacts the relevant agency* to request the independent interview is undertaken.

   *EWS for those of statutory school age and CNXS / YST for those over school age

If a child/young person comes into reception and has run away from home due to family breakdown, the independent interview is undertaken by the Initial Contact Worker as part of the ‘referral on process’ to Diversion or the Youth Support Teams. This information should be passed to EWS / school when the child / young person is of school age.

If a child / young person remains missing, it is the responsibility of the duty worker to call a Missing Child meeting. The timescale will depend on the vulnerability factors relating to the particular child or young person, but must be held (at the latest) when the period missing reaches 14 days.

Dec 2009
Appendix D – Independent Review Interview Guidance for Professionals

Children and young people who go missing from home and care -
Independent Return interview guidance for professionals

Return interviews should be carried out by an ‘independent’ person ie not the parent or main carer, who is able to build up trust with the young person and to follow up any actions that emerge.

The purpose of the return interview is to
- identify and deal with any harm the child / young person has suffered, including harm that may not have been disclosed by the child / young person at the police welfare check
- understand and try to address the reasons why the child / young person ran away
- try to prevent it happening again
- to ensure follow up of any emerging issues, including sharing of relevant information with other agencies, including police, as appropriate

Preparation for interview
- history / knowledge of child / young person
- clarity with child / young person re boundaries (ie confidentiality etc)

A risk assessment needs to be made taking into account
- the child / young person’s individual circumstances (including family circumstances)
- the motivation for running
- possible destination
- who else may be involved
- pattern of absences (if any)
- emotional presentation of the child / young person (eg anxious; nervous; angry; stressed; low affect; withdrawn)
- physical presentation of the child / young person
- level of vulnerability
- capacity to understand the risk they may be placing themselves in
- potential risk of sexual exploitation
- any health concerns

Possible areas to be explored with the child / young person are
- where they have been staying
- who were they with
- have they run away before
- how did they pay for things while away and how did they get access to money
• did anything happen at home / are there issues at home which made them want to run away
• did anything happen at school or in the community which made them want to run away
• were they safe while they were away
• were they a victim of crime while away eg have they been hurt / assaulted / stolen from
• what could be done to help them in their personal life to prevent them running away again